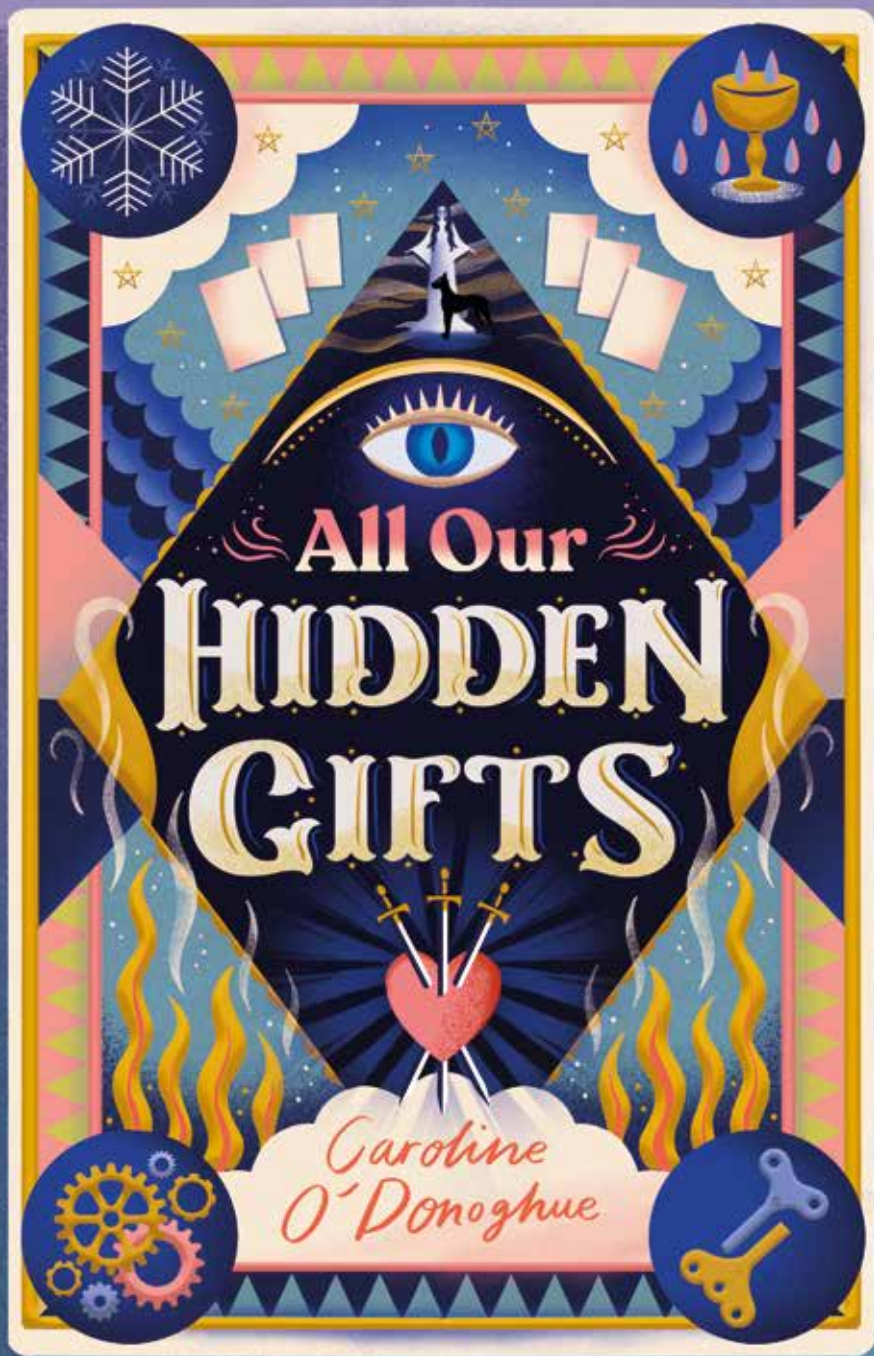
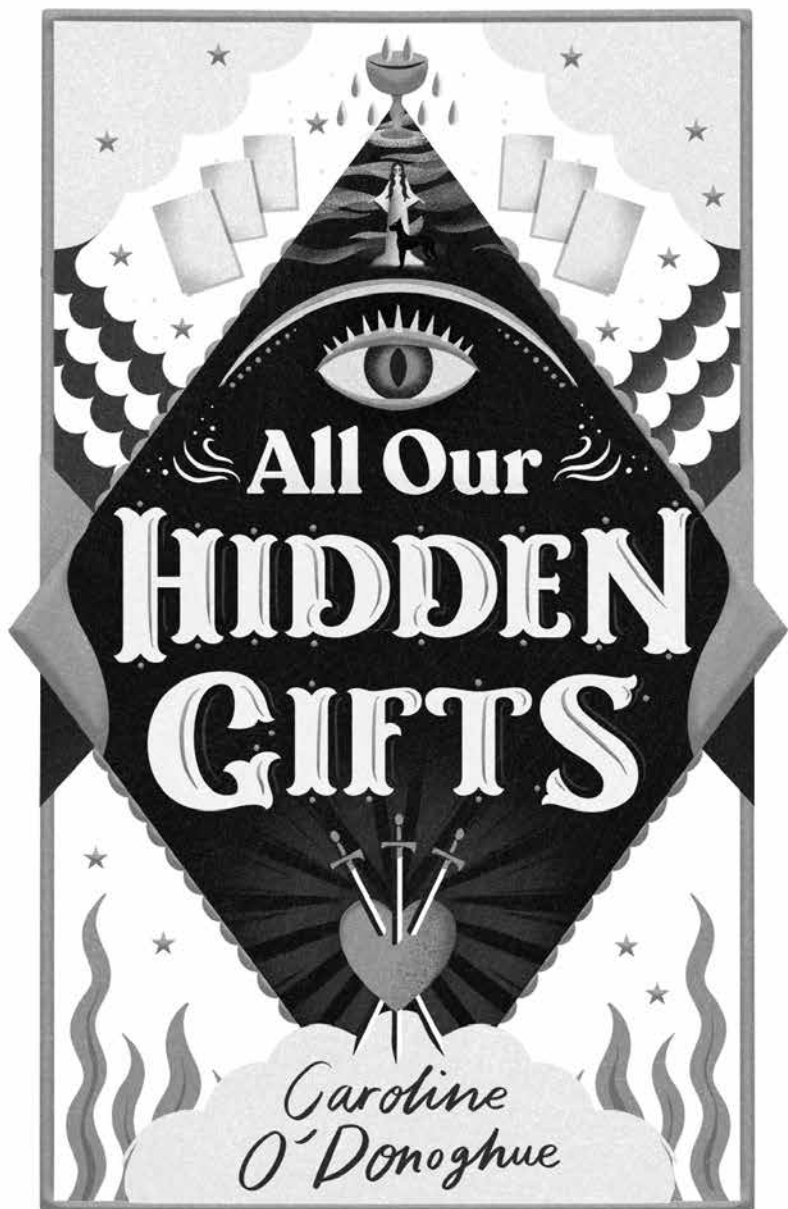


“Fiercely, furiously good.” *Melinda Salisbury*





WALKER  
BOOKS

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*To my family, for being interesting.*

*And to Harry Harris, for waking up the Housekeeper first.*

# CHAPTER ONE

THE STORY OF HOW I ENDED UP WITH THE CHOKEY CARD Tarot Consultancy can be told in four detentions, three notes sent home, two bad report cards and one Tuesday afternoon that ended with me being locked in a cupboard.

I'll give you the short version.

Miss Harris gave me in-school suspension after I threw a shoe at Mr Bernard. It was payback for him calling me stupid for not knowing my Italian verbs. To this, I responded that Italian was a ridiculous language to learn anyway, and that we should all be learning Spanish because globally, more people speak Spanish. Mr Bernard then said that if I really thought I was going to learn Spanish quicker than I am currently learning Italian, I was deluded. He turned back to the whiteboard.

And then I threw my shoe.

It didn't hit him. I'd like to stress that. It merely hit the board next to him. But no one seems to care about that, except me. Maybe if I had a best friend – or really, any close friend at all – I'd have someone to vouch for me. To tell them that it was a joke, and that I would never knowingly hurt a teacher. Someone who could explain how it is with me: that sometimes frustration and rage surge through me, sparking out in ways I can't predict or control.

But that friend doesn't exist, and I'm not sure I would deserve them if they did.

In-school suspension starts on Tuesday morning, and Miss Harris meets me at her office and then leads me to the basement.

In the four years I've been at St Bernadette's, the sewage pipes have frozen and burst twice, not to mention the annual flooding. As a result, the two tiny classrooms down here are covered in grass-green mould, and a damp, mildewy smell permeates everything. Teachers try to avoid scheduling classes down here as much as they can, so naturally it gets used a lot for detention, exams and storing extraneous junk that no one can be bothered to throw away.

The holy grail of this is the Chokey, a long, deep cupboard that makes everyone think of the Trunchbull's torture room in *Matilda*.

Miss Harris waves a dramatic arm at the cupboard. "Ta-da!"

"You want me to clean out the Chokey?" I gasp. "That's inhumane."

"More inhumane than throwing a shoe at someone, Maeve? Make sure to separate general waste from dry recyclables."

"It didn't hit him," I protest. "You can't leave me to clean this out. Not by myself. Miss, there might be a dead rat in there."

She hands me a roll of black plastic bin bags. "Well, then, that would go in 'general waste'."

And she leaves me there. Alone. In a creepy basement.

It's impossible to know where to start. I start picking

at things, grumbling to myself that St Bernadette's is like this. It's not like normal schools. It was a big Victorian town house for a very long time, until at some point during the 1960s, Sister Assumpta inherited it. Well. We say 'Sister', but she's not really one: she was a novice, like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, and dropped out of the nunnery, and started a school for "well-bred girls". It probably seemed like a good idea when the number of "well-bred" girls in the city was about a dozen. But there's about 400 of us now, all bursting out of this crumbling house, classes rotating between draughty prefabs and converted old attic bedrooms. It's obscene how expensive it is to send your daughter to school here. I have to be careful about how much I complain in front of Mum and Dad. The other four didn't have to go here, after all. They were bright enough to make it through free schools unaided.

St Bernadette's costs about two thousand euro a term, and wherever the money goes, it's not on health and safety. I can't even step into the Chokey at first because of all the broken old desks and chairs that are stacked up inside, blocking the entrance. A fresh waft of rot and dust hits my nose every time a piece of furniture comes free. I try to carry each piece out and make a neat pile in the corner of the classroom, but when chair legs start coming loose in my hand, smacking against my legs and laddering my tights, it gets less orderly. I throw my school jumper off and start hurling rubbish across the room like an Olympic javelin champion. It becomes cathartic after a while.

Once all the furniture is gone, I'm amazed to see how much space there is in the Chokey. I had always thought it

was just a big cupboard, but it's clear it used to be some kind of kitchen pantry. You could fit three or four girls in here, no problem. It's good information to have. There's no such thing as too many hiding places. It needs a lightbulb or something, though. The door is so heavy that I have to prop it open with an old chair, and even then, I'm working in near darkness.

The furniture, however, is just the beginning. There are piles of papers, magazines and old schoolbooks. I find exam papers from 1991, *Bunty* annuals from the 1980s and a couple of copies of some magazine called *Jackie*. I spend a while flicking through them, reading the problem pages and the weird illustrated soap operas that play out over ten panels. They're ridiculously dated. The stories are all called something like "Millie's Big Catch!" and "A Date With Destiny!"

I read "A Date With Destiny". It turns out Destiny is a horse.

When I reach the back, things start getting really interesting. A couple of cardboard boxes are stacked against the wall, covered in a thick, chalky dust. Pulling the top one down, I open it and find three Sony Walkmans, a packet of Superkings cigarettes, a half-empty bottle of crusty peach schnapps and a pack of playing cards.

Contraband. This must have been where all the confiscated stuff ended up.

There's also a single hair slide with a little silver angel on it, looking very pure and holy next to the fags and booze. I try it on briefly and then get worried about nits, so throw it in a bin bag. Only one Walkman has a tape in it, so I stick the headphones on and press play. Amazingly, it still works. The cassette starts turning. *Holy crap!*



A playful, plodding bass line thrums in my head. Dum-dum-dee-dum-de-dum. A woman's voice whispers to me, childlike and sweet. She starts singing about a man she knows, with teeth as white as snow, which feels like a dumb line. What other colour would she expect them to be?

I listen, clipping the Walkman to my skirt. Most of the songs I don't recognize, but they all have a grungy, arty edge to them. Songs where you can hear the bad eyeshadow. I can't remember the last time I listened to something and didn't know exactly what it was. I'm not even sure I want to find out. It's sort of cool not to know. I listen to it over and over. There are about eleven songs in all, all either by very high-pitched men or very low-voiced women. I pop open the cover to see that it's a homemade mix. The only decoration is a white strip label that says, "*SPRING 1990*".

I try to lift another heavy box, but the damp cardboard splits at the bottom and comes crashing down on me, smacking me full force in the face. Something must hit against the door because the chair I was using to prop it open suddenly topples over, and the Chokey door slams shut.

I'm plunged into stinking darkness. I grapple around for the doorknob, and realize that there isn't one. Maybe it's not a pantry after all. Maybe it's just a closet.

The music keeps playing in my ears. Now it doesn't seem fun and bouncy. It's creepy. Morrissey is singing about cemetery gates. The tape gets stuck as I pound on the door, a little hiccup at the end of the word "gates".

"HELLO?" I shout. "HELLO, HELLO! I'm STUCK in HERE. I'm STUCK IN THE CHOKEY!"

“... cemetery gAtEs, cemetery gAtEs, cemetery gAtEs, cemetery gAtEs...”

The cupboard, which had felt so roomy just minutes ago, now feels like a matchbox about to be set alight. I have never thought of myself as claustrophobic, but the closer the walls press in on me, the more I think about the air in the room, which already feels so thick and stale that it might choke me alive.

*I will not cry, I will not cry, I will not cry.*

I don't cry. I never cry. What does happen is actually worse. Blood rushes to my head and, even though I'm in complete darkness, I see spots of purple in my vision and I think I'm about to faint. I grapple around for something to steady me, and my hand falls on something cool, heavy and rectangular. Something that feels like paper.

The battery is starting to die on the Walkman. “... cemetery gAtEs, cemetery gAtEs, cemetery gAaaaaaaaayyyyyyyyy...”

And then nothing. Silence. Silence except me screaming for help and banging against the door.

The door flings open, and it's Miss Harris. I practically fall on top of her.

“Maeve,” she says, her expression worried.

Despite my panic, I still feel smug at how concerned she looks. *Take that, bitch.*

“What happened? Are you OK?”

“The door closed on me,” I say in a burble. “The door closed, and I was stuck and I...”

“Sit down,” she orders. She fishes in her bag and brings out a bottle of water, unscrews the cap and hands it to me. “Take small sips. Don't be sick. You're panting, Maeve.”

"I'm OK," I say at last. "I just panicked. Is it lunch now?"

She looks really worried now.

"Maeve, it's four o'clock."

"What?"

"You mean to say you haven't taken lunch? You've been here this whole time?"

"Yes! You told me to stay here!"

She shakes her head, as if I'm the magic porridge pot that keeps spewing porridge relentlessly until you say the magic word for it to stop.

"Do you know," she says, walking into the cupboard (I briefly consider closing the door on her), "it's amazing what you can do when you apply yourself. I had no idea there was so much space in there. You're a magician. Well done."

"Thanks," I reply weakly. "I guess I'll become a cleaner."

"I think you should clean up in the bathroom and go home," she says, and I realize what a state I must look. I'm covered head to toe in dust, my tights are ripped and there are bits of cobweb stuck to my school shirt. "Are you sure you're OK?"

"Yep," I say, a little snappy this time.

"I'll see you in the morning. We can figure out what to do with all this furniture then." She makes her way to the door, fixing her handbag back on her shoulder. She takes one last look at me, then tilts her head to the side. "Huh," she says at last, "I never knew you were into tarot cards."

I have no idea what she's talking about. Then I look down. There, clutched in my hands, is a deck of cards.